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SUBJECT: TIBETAN NOMAD POLICIES IN SICHUAN: SETTLEMENT, CONFLICT AND  
AUTHORITY

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CLASSIFIED BY: David E. Brown, Consul General.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is the first of two cables on settlement policies and economic development in Tibetan communities of Hongyuan County, Aba (Tibetan: Ngaba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, western Sichuan, based on EconOff's travel there in November and December.

Summary and Comment

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Newly-built Tibetan nomad settlement villages have multiplied over the last year throughout Hongyuan County of western Sichuan's Aba Prefecture, part of the provincial government's campaign to effectively end nomadic life in the province by 2012. Although Tibetan herders in Hongyuan were often pleased with the amenities of new government-subsidized homes, they had significant reservations about costs and the distance of the homes from their herds. Herders strongly opposed the grassland contracting and enclosure policies that preceded the settlement campaign, beginning about a decade ago in Hongyuan. The government's forced ending of traditional community land ownership in favor of household-based contracting of usage rights triggered sometimes deadly intra-communal and intra-family conflicts that continue to this day. Local governments and law enforcement have been ineffective in addressing the conflicts, and traditional secular leaders and monks continue to play central roles in resolution.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Environmental protection and improvement of livelihoods are the most often cited rationales driving grassland enclosure and nomad settlement policies. However, the true intent of the policies may be more accurately reflected in the "Three Proximities (sange kaojin)" principle (para 6), emphasizing the need to settle nomads near government facilities. A sense of official urgency to extend government authority over scattered and hard to control nomad communities, stemming from the events of March 2008, appears to be driving the settlement efforts. Another potent indicator of the extent to which the government regards these communities as a threat is indicated by a large, newly-built People's Armed Police (PAP) base we stumbled across on the outskirts of the county seat. End Summary and Comment.

Background:

Restructuring of Nomadic Life Across the Tibetan Plateau

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14. (SBU) Since the 1980s, grassland management and settlement/relocation have been implemented in various forms throughout nomadic Tibetan areas -- both within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and the autonomous prefectures in Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu. Grassland management or "contracting" policies, and the accompanying fencing and enclosure, have been typically rationalized in terms of environmental protection -- in particular preventing desertification by ensuring that the livestock-carrying capacity of the fragile grassland is not exceeded. Initially, settlement/relocation programs were carried out sporadically to make way for new developments (railroads, roads, dams). However, beginning in 2006, and first in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Qinghai Province, settlement programs for Tibetan nomads became focused on moving all nomads to single fixed locations. This was justified as a way to improve livelihoods, and facilitate the transition to modern life. In their current, more sweeping iterations, the grassland contracting and nomad settlement policies combine to affect a radical restructuring of the lives of all of the estimated two million Tibetan nomads, many of whom have traditionally lived beyond government reach. Our contacts have often cited these policies as a major source of anger and confusion among Tibetans.

15. (SBU) Noting that policies have varied in timing and local application, and that obtaining complete information on them is difficult, below is an overview of the timeline and content of the two main policies:

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-- Grassland contracting and fencing. China began implementing grassland contracting (or privatization) in three main phases following the conclusion of collectivization in the early 1980s, first privatizing herds through the late 1980s, then distributing collective land rights to townships or villages through the mid 1990s. The third and current phase of household-based contracting for grassland began around 1995 in some areas, involving allocation of time-limited land use contract rights to individual households based on family size, and making them responsible for "protecting their own grasslands." These policies were accelerated and expanded around 1999 and fencing of individual households' grassland began in 2000. Local cooperation with these policies has varied. In the Tibetan regions of southern Gansu Province, for example, some communities have refused to allow their land to be divided, and authorities have imprisoned some individuals for their opposition.

-- Settlement of nomadic herders. Comprehensive settlement policies for Tibetan nomads are a more recent phenomenon, begun in 2006 when the TAR launched a five-year plan for nomadic settlement. In the same year, Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan announced plans to carry out a nomad settlement program in Qinghai. In 2007, President Hu Jintao dispatched officials from the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to Qinghai for further study of the issue. In September 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao chaired a special meeting on development issues in the Tibetan areas of China and formulated "Some Suggestions for Helping Social Economic Development in Qinghai and Other Tibetan Areas." These "suggestions" further accelerated nomadic settlement in all Tibetan areas of China, including Sichuan, where an official program was launched in October 2008 (para 9). In October 2009, the NDRC held a conference on "Nomadic Settlement Programs in Seven Provinces in China"; Sichuan province was used as a model, particularly citing the cases of Hongyuan and Ruogai (Tib: Dzorge) Counties in Aba Prefecture and Lhagang Township of Kangding (Tib: Dartsedo) County of Ganzi (Tib: Kardze) Prefecture.

16. (SBU) The settling of nomadic populations, previously with no single fixed residence, in population centers (settlement villages) is being done in accordance with the "three proximities" principle (sange kaojin): close to township and county government seats, and close to major roads. The new villages are also intended to provide the conveniences of modern

life, such as clinics and schools. While traditional Tibetan communities often are oriented around monasteries, new villages are sometimes established at a distance from monasteries.

17. (SBU) Most of the Tibetan population of Aba (54.5 percent of the prefecture's total population of 850,000) is directly affected by these policies. In Aba's Hongyuan County, the settlement program impacts an even larger portion of the population because nomadic Tibetans comprise three-quarters of the county population of 40,000. The county is characterized by vast rangelands, and the economy remains centered around animal husbandry/herding. This is supplemented by gathering and selling of medicinal herbs and fungus (such as highly valued caterpillar fungus (ref D)), and some development of tourism. (The hotels in the county seat -- mostly empty or closed in winter -- are reportedly full of Chinese tourists come summer.)

Two Trips to Aba:

Official Tour of "Happy and Grateful" Herder Households

Contrasts with Private Conversations

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18. (SBU) EconOff recently made two separate trips to Hongyuan County in November and December, respectively. The first trip, accompanying an official delegation from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD, an inter-governmental organization of eight Himalayan-area

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countries of which China is a member), was hosted by the Sichuan Grassland Science Academy (SGSA). SGSA officials, none of whom were locals, enthusiastically promoted the benefits of government programs for the local population, and emphasized the need for herders to improve their understanding of environmental protection and better herding practices. We were introduced to several herder families whose homes were identified as pilot "demonstration sites" for government programs receiving ICIMOD support. These visits were kept short (10-15 minutes) and involved the male head of family coming out to explain the ways the programs had assisted them and expressing their gratitude for these projects. Chinese handlers on the trip were notably enthusiastic about getting the group quickly back on the bus once the official presentation was concluded, frequently cutting off questions by the group's members with a vociferous "Ok! Let's go!"

19. (C) During a second follow-up trip, EconOff was able to speak privately, and at some length, with a number of local Tibetans at several settlement villages, the monastery at Rishi Village of Serde Township, and others. These conversations revealed a much different picture of local views of settlement and land policies, and how they are affecting traditional communities and livelihoods. (Note: A request to the Sichuan Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) for meetings with officials in Hongyuan during this December trip was declined, citing "bad weather in Aba." Most of both Aba and Ganzi Prefectures, were effectively -- though not officially -- shut down to us following the events of March 2008 and through much of 2009. ConGenOffs last officially approved trip to Hongyuan was in 2007. End Note.)

Settlement Villages: Modern Amenities

and Government Subsidies Welcome, But at What Cost?

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10. (SBU) The Sichuan Provincial government in early 2009 released a "General Program of Tibetan Nomad Settlement Action Plan in the Tibetan Areas of Sichuan," which announced a four-year campaign to settle the province's Tibetan nomads,

involving an investment of 18 billion RMB (USD 2.5 billion). "By the year 2012, the wandering of nomads who have no fixed settlement will have ended," said an official statement on the policy. Building of new housing settlements, already commenced within the last few years, saw a notable uptick in 2009. By 2012, more than 40,000 fixed residences will house over 200,000 nomads throughout Aba, the prefectural government website indicates. Travelling along the country roads of Hongyuan County in November and December, we encountered newly built settlement villages dotting the landscape at frequent intervals. Many we saw were still being built (by non-local construction companies employing Han Chinese laborers from other areas), or just-completed, but not yet occupied. In Serde Township, Hongyuan, we found welcome banners and decorations still evident for the August 2009 visit of CPPC Chairman Jia Qinglin, along with Liu Qibao, Party Secretary of Sichuan Province and Sichuan Governor Jiang Jufeng to survey the new housing developments.

¶11. (SBU) We spoke to Tibetan residents at settlements along the way to the Hongyuan County seat from the neighboring county of Songpan. The new settlement villages we saw typically comprised several hundred concrete single family homes, mostly with Tibetan-style embellishment but otherwise distinctly non-traditional. Residents explained that they were not forced to move to the new homes, but had no other choice if their family needed a new house. Many felt they had to take advantage of the government's subsidy offer for homes in the settlements. They also noted some positives: "It's nicer and warmer than our own simple traditional shelters," some said, while others highlighted improved security, noting that crime had increased as village populations grew. Government investment in the settlement villages has also included public facilities such as clinics and schools, along with new government offices and police stations. However, we came across several new government facilities that appeared to be closed and empty.

¶12. (SBU) Residents also expressed significant reservations about their new homes. "We have new shiny things, so it looks

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better, but we're not so sure..." one woman said, trailing off, as she served us tea in her new kitchen. Some settlements we visited were located at one of the community's traditional settlements, but herders still emphasized that they were of limited use to those doing the actual herding as grazing lands were typically at least several kilometers away. Many of the settlements were located in entirely new locations, even further from grazing areas. Two young herders in Serde Township -- where new homes have been built on the site of the former winter settlement -- said that the new houses were good for "old people and children," but mostly irrelevant to their own lives as they continue to stay in simple shelters near their herds, an account we heard repeatedly. They described the new homes as designed to teach the next generation how to live a settled life.

¶13. (SBU) The cost of the new houses was cited as an issue for many families. Government subsidies are typically in the range of 20,000 RMB (about USD 3,000) per family, and access to low-interest loans of about the same amount also helps. However, families must cover the remainder of the total cost of 100-200,000 RMB (about USD 14,700-29,400) per home. At a village on the outskirts of the county seat a local couple told us that several families there had sold their entire herds to pay the costs of their new house. In Waqie (Tib: Wachen) Township we spoke with a middle-aged woman who described herself as poor, with only seven or eight yaks. She voiced great ambivalence about the new white concrete house she and her family were scheduled to move into within days. Her family needed a new home --without it her daughter would have no place to live, she said -- but they wanted something much smaller and within their means. The government had given her only the option of a house that was far too big and expensive, she complained. She was not sure how they would afford it, talked reluctantly of gathering loans from friends and family, and was uncertain how they would pay for furnishings.

Land Contracting and Fencing Unwelcome,

¶14. (SBU) Driving throughout Hongyuan, what often appeared to be fairly new fencing ran along most roadways and stretched in all directions into the visible landscape. Rolls of new fencing material were stacked along roadways, and new fences in progress were seen at intervals. Land contracting and fencing policies were initiated a decade ago, locals told us, consistently describing it as a forced government policy they had not welcomed. Previously, despite a series of policies affecting pastureland, traditional practices had largely persisted, with herders rotating their herds through large areas of commonly used unfenced land. (Note: Tibetan nomad communities have traditionally practiced fairly complex land use and rotational grazing practices, planned and managed by traditional authorities. End note.)

¶15. (SBU) The new policies dictated allocation of the land rights based on family size, followed by fencing to demarcate the new borders. Without exception, every local Tibetan to whom we spoke described the policies as "causing problems", making it difficult to ensure sufficient grassland access to feed their herds. Those with larger herds found themselves struggling for access to enough grass, and having to annually lease land from others, a large expenditure typically funded through the sale of livestock (several reported an annual cost of about 20,000 RMB). Families with smaller herds were, however, able to benefit as they leased their unused land to others.

¶16. (SBU) The early days of the land allocation in Hongyuan were especially marked by conflict over grassland resources, locals noted. Disputes flared up frequently as yaks transgressed the newly defined boundaries, or herders entered other families' grassland to access water resources previously shared by the community but now lying within a single family's pasture. (Officials, on the other hand, have claimed that there were conflicts before the fencing that the policies effectively resolved. See ref B.) On occasion, these disputes escalated into violence resulting in deaths. Locals in one village with a

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population of around 1,500 told us that conflicts arising from the land allocation have left about 10 dead over the years. While some said that conflict has stabilized somewhat, all still described it as a problem. A monk at a local monastery described the conflicts as unabated, noting that the new land policy had significantly and negatively affected the fabric of communities. Whereas previously conflicts would arise occasionally between communities, he said, now the conflicts are more often between friends and households, or even within families.

The Limits of Government Authority:

Communities Turn to Monasteries and

Traditional Leaders for Conflict Resolution

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¶17. (SBU) According to local Tibetans in Hongyuan, government cadres and law enforcement lack credibility and have been ineffective in addressing the conflicts arising from the land allocation policies. Instead, both traditional secular leaders and monks continue to play central roles in conflict resolution. In Serde Township, locals told us that each of the township's three villages has a committee of about 10 "elders" (traditional secular community leaders) who coordinate with the respective village-based monasteries to address conflicts as they arise.

¶18. (SBU) They said that the government allows these committees because they themselves are unable to address the conflicts. In Mewa, a local herder echoed the assessment of cadres' ineffectiveness, and told us that the local monastery often steps in. However, he emphasized, the monks' relationship with the government is complicated. On the one, hand officials need monastery assistance to prevent conflict escalation; on the other hand, they are not happy with the fact that they need it. Monks therefore have to be careful when they intercede to not look like they are becoming too influential. A monk at one local monastery discussed their role in conflict resolution, noting that official authorities arrest the suspects when deaths occur, but have no ability to address the root causes of conflict or prevent escalation. That is where the monks, along with traditional secular leaders, come in to help mediate he said.

¶19. (SBU) Mediation will often result in some form of payment by the family of the killer to victim's family. Without the monastery's role, the conflicts over grazing land would be much bigger, he said. (Note: Tibetan Monks throughout the Tibetan areas are called on by communities and sometimes local officials to mediate and calm down difficult situations. Experienced local officials know they need the monks, yet working with them is politically sensitive. End Note.)

¶20. (C) The limits of Chinese government authority were also indicated by other interactions during our travels. While visiting one village, a local ethnic Tibetan official approached us in his government vehicle. We quickly discovered that sitting on the front seat was a Tibetan translation of a biography of Phuntsok Wangyal (a founder of the Tibetan Communist Party later imprisoned in China for 18 years, see [tinyurl.com/phuntsok](http://tinyurl.com/phuntsok)). There is no doubt that should he be discovered in possession of this book -- published in Dharamsala and banned in China -- the official would be in serious trouble. Throughout our travel, we saw no openly displayed photos of the Dalai Lama, but locals repeatedly emphasized to us that "he is in our hearts." Displaying his picture too close to main roads and government facilities is too dangerous, they noted, but they are able to do so in their simple herder shelters further afield. One man ran after us after we visited his home to make sure we saw that around his neck was a pendant with the Dalai Lama's photo on one side, and the 10thPanchen Lama on the other.

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